

# Collecting Extremes: A History of the Wilcox Collection



**Emily Hughes Dominick**

*Archives Contractor, National Archives and Records Administration,  
2312 East Bannister Road, Kansas City, Missouri 64131 (email: emily\_dominick@yahoo.com).*

**Abstract** This paper discusses the history of the Wilcox Collection of Contemporary Political Movements, an archival collection housed at the Kenneth Spencer Research Library on the campus of the University of Kansas in Lawrence. Through this article, the interesting history of the collection is revealed by way of a general description of the holdings in the collection, including an explanation of how the collection has been cataloged, housed, and cared for; a biographical sketch of the collector and information on his political involvements and contributions; and finally a discussion of why this collection will continue to be important to scholarship for many years to come—this section includes an overview of how the collection has been used over its life.

"Freedom of thought and freedom of speech in our great institutions are absolutely necessary for the preservation of our country. The moment either is restricted, liberty begins to wither and die. . . ."

—John Peter Atgeld (*Wilcox, Selected Quotations*)

"The community which dares not protect its humblest and most hated member in the free utterance of his opinions, no matter how false or hateful, is only a gang of slaves. If there is anything in the universe that can't stand discussion, let it crack."

—Wendell Phillips, Speech, 1863 (*Wilcox, Selected Quotations*)

## Introduction: The Wilcox Collection

The University of Kansas Libraries boasts a treasure trove of extremist political literature—The Wilcox Collection of Contemporary Political Movements. Housed in the Kenneth Spencer Research Library (KSRL) in the Kansas Collection, the Wilcox Collection currently consists of more than 5,000 books and pamphlets; 4,000 periodicals; 1,000 audio tapes; 70 linear feet of manuscript materials; and 100,000 pieces of ephemera such as flyers, brochures, clippings, and posters—and it continues to grow.

To fit the mission of the collection, the materials must satisfy three basic requirements: the items must be from the United States, be political in nature, and fall into the category of extreme thought—mainstream material is not collected.<sup>1</sup> The bulk of the collection dates from the 1960s to the present. A sampling of the collection reveals a broad spectrum of materials. From the left, the collection holds items from the Students for a Democratic Society, Communist Party of the U.S.A., Women Strike for Peace, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The right wing is represented by publications of the John Birch Society, the Christian Nationalist Crusade, Young Americans for Freedom, and the National States Right Party. The Collection includes books like *Who Killed Junior*, published by the Right to Life League of Southern California; *Cooperative: To Make Cooperatives Successful, People Must Become Cooperatively Minded*, by Wiley Overholser; *Karl Marx*, by David McClellan; *Upsurge in the South: The Negro People Fight for Freedom*, by Benjamin Davis; and *Cointelpro: FBI's Secret War on Political Freedom*, by Nelson Blackstock. Ephemeral artifacts include brochures and other literature from such organizations as Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament; Peace Organization; Citizens for the Election of Conservative Candidates; and Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union, a member of the AFL-CIO.

## Building a Collection

"Some people collect stamps, some people collect coins, I collect leftist and rightist literature."

—Laird Wilcox<sup>2</sup>

"If classification is the mirror of collective humanity's thoughts and perceptions, then collecting is its material embodiment. Collecting is classification lived, experienced in three dimensions. The history of collecting is thus the narrative of how human beings have striven to accommodate, to appropriate, and to extend the taxonomies and systems of knowledge they have inherited." —Ellsner and Cardinal 1994, 2

The Wilcox Collection's namesake is Laird Wilcox. A former University of Kansas student, a political activist, and a life-long supporter of civil liberties, Wilcox began accumulating extremist or fringe political literature as a teenager, in the late 1950s. By the time he enrolled at the University of Kansas in 1963, Wilcox had become an a serious collector. Part of his collection was purchased by the University's library system in 1965, and he continues to donate materials to this day. Wilcox estimates that he acquired roughly 80 per cent of the collection; the collection is rounded out by materials contributed by other donors and direct purchases made by the library, including current subscriptions to more than fifty periodicals.<sup>3</sup>

Wilcox cites a Communist Party publication owned by his father as the first item that he collected as a teenager: by the time he was 17, he was accumulating literature from "groups all over the political spectrum."<sup>4</sup> His interest in extreme political ideas was sparked by growing up in a family that exhibited a "fair degree of political intensity." "I had an aunt and uncle who were members of the Communist Party. Another aunt and uncle became members of the John Birch Society in the mid-1960's.<sup>5</sup> My maternal grandfather knew Sen. Pat McCarran, author of the McCarran Act.<sup>6</sup> My paternal grandfather was a liberal Republican. My father (whose sister was the Communist) was a brooding socialist intellectual. So, as a child growing up I was around a lot of information and opinion."<sup>7</sup> The political activism and strong ideological beliefs of his family introduced Wilcox to a world of diverse and often opposing opinions. While interested in competing political arguments, it was the psychology of politics that really interested Wilcox:

"I found early on that the particular cause or crusade a person identified with had to do with largely incidental factors, like peer groups, family, who got to them first and so on. What was interesting to me was why some people seemed so easy to hook while others were relatively immune to it. Some people seem to have a need (sometimes desperate) to identify with something bigger than themselves. Others are content to live their lives in real time and go on from day to day. They may have political preferences but they don't control their lives. How to account for this has always been the question."<sup>8</sup> He further explains: "What puzzled me—and what I spent a lifetime studying—is the 'why' of extreme political views. Why do people believe and identify with the various causes and crusades. Incidental to this was studying their literature, and that is how the Wilcox Collection began."<sup>9</sup>

The literature that he was "casually accumulating" as a teenager became part of his deliberate goal of forming a collection in 1962. His collection was al-

ready well underway when he enrolled at University of Kansas in 1963. During his second semester, Wilcox's collection won first place and \$100 in the Taylor Book Awards, an annual book collecting competition held at the University, for his collection titled "Ephemeral Political Literature in the United States."<sup>10</sup> In 1965, the libraries at the University of Kansas offered Wilcox \$1,000.00 for four file drawers filled with political literature. The original sale consisted of some 8,500 pieces of literature, which were to be housed in the Special Collections department of the Watson Memorial Library.<sup>11</sup> An article appearing in the *University Daily Kansan (UDK)*, the campus paper, written soon after the collection was begun, describes Wilcox's approach to collecting: "Wilcox has found that the easiest way to obtain this material is to join the organization which publishes it. 'I must be a member of at least four dozen organizations on both the left and the right,' Wilcox said."<sup>12</sup>

Wilcox continued to collect over the next four decades. During the late 1960s he amassed large numbers of documents from the radical student movements. Because of this, he recalled, the Wilcox Collection has an "excellent representation of material from that period."<sup>13</sup> In 1969, Wilcox decided to concentrate his efforts by specializing in materials from the right, reasoning that "almost nobody was collecting it and there were literally dozens of library collections of 'underground' leftist materials. I wanted to avoid duplicating other collections if possible."<sup>14</sup>

His most prolific collecting period fell between 1976 and 1986. During these years, he was often traveling and had built up a group of contacts who continued to send him new materials. These additions helped expand the collection and also informed Wilcox's *Guide to the American Left* and *Guide to the American Right*, annually published guides offering a "Who's Who" look at organizations on both the left and the right. These guides were published most years between 1978 to 1999. Wilcox sold several hundred copies of the guides each year to individuals, organizations, and libraries, and in so doing Wilcox kept up to date on the changes occurring on both the Left and the Right, and also helped finance his further collecting.<sup>15</sup>

At his peak, Wilcox was annually donating an estimated 12 or more full file boxes to the Spencer Research Library; now Wilcox estimates that his donations have dwindled to 3 or 4 boxes per year. He is also in the process of donating about half of his personal library on political movements of the left and right.<sup>16</sup>

### *Acquiring Grant Funding*

Not only has the Wilcox Collection grown since its inception, but also it has become well cataloged. Concerned librarians worked to ensure that the collection was properly cataloged and made accessible to a wide spectrum of researchers. Sheryl Williams, Curator of the Kansas Collection, along with other staff of the KSRL, became frustrated with the unprocessed and uncataloged materials within

the Wilcox Collection. In the mid-1980s, with the understanding that the collection was important and needed to be more accessible—and also taking into consideration that the library did not have enough staff to organize the materials—Ms. Williams began looking for funding, and wrote a grant request for the U.S. Department of Education. Although this granting program (Title II-C) no longer exists, at the time it provided money for research libraries.<sup>17</sup> The grant, which Sheryl Williams estimated to be around \$140,000, was approved and distributed from 1986 and 1989. This money allowed the Spencer Research Library to hire three catalogers and two graduate assistants who made major headway in the cataloging process. Becky Schulte, who was experienced with grant projects, was hired in 1986 to assist in managing the grant.

Throughout most of the first two years of the project, staff and assistants cataloged the serials. The journals and other periodicals caused some cataloging difficulties. Some of the periodicals changed their names, some had short life spans, others were missing issues, and many were one-of-a kind items. Cataloging was time-consuming, but necessary. During the third year of grant funding, staff spent time cataloging ephemeral artifacts, which are often not found in libraries due to their short lifespans. The ephemeral materials consist of flyers, posters, "junk mail," and solicitations sent by organizations who were looking to boost their membership. This "fugitive material" is rarely seen in collections but adds to the unique research materials available. Because ephemera are infrequently collected, the KSRL was breaking new ground in its efforts of cataloging and, according to Williams, the library was "cutting-edge" in terms of how cataloging of ephemera was approached.<sup>18</sup> In most libraries, ephemera, if saved, would end up in vertical files likely in a file cabinet organized by subject headings. The KSRL, by contrast, took these artifacts and made them available through the University's online catalog and via the OCLC database, a common research tool. By this method, the items are searchable by way of multiple access points. In other words, a researcher could search for ephemera by organization, genre, or name. In order to catalog the material in a timely fashion, the artifacts are grouped by organization or individual name.

Those involved with the grant project made major progress in cataloging, but were not able to catalog the entire collection—partly because funding was cut short the final year, but also because the library continued to receive new additions to the collection that proceeded to pile up. Benefits of having most of the materials cataloged and available via the University of Kansas's on-line catalog and also through the OCLC database were immediately apparent. University of Kansas students became aware of the rich collection. Also, researchers without physical access to the collection could discover, with the help of the OCLC database, that a wealth of unique information was available at the KSRL. Subsequently, interested parties from around the world made their way to Lawrence, Kansas, in order to use the Wilcox Collection.<sup>19</sup>

*Preservation and Organization of the Wilcox Collection*

The Kenneth Spencer Research Library was built specifically for the purpose of housing rare books and special collections. All of the collections held in this building have the benefit of an optimal environment that is controlled to meet archival standards. Thus, the materials in the Wilcox Collection, along with all of the other collections in the building are stored in closed stacks where the environmental conditions are closely monitored to assure that temperature and relative humidity are kept close to constant, direct sunlight in storage and exhibit areas is avoided, and fluorescent light fixtures are filtered to minimize damaging visible and ultraviolet rays. The patrons of the library also are instructed on proper handling techniques of fragile items—book cradles are used on especially fragile books, white cotton gloves are worn when dealing with photographic materials, and only pencils are allowed in the reading room. All of these factors help prolong the life of all of the collections so that they will be available far into the future.<sup>20</sup> In general, materials in the Wilcox Collection cause preservation challenges. Many of the materials collected were simply never intended to last. These sorts of materials include newspapers, paperback books; ephemeral materials like posters and flyers—most are printed on poor quality acidic paper.

To help stabilize the materials and slow their deterioration the items are carefully stored in conditions that won't adversely affect them: "The oversized materials are stored flat in folders and map cases, other contents of files are placed in archival folders and boxes, and the newspaper clippings are photocopied on acid-free paper."<sup>21</sup>

Specifically, the items in the Wilcox Collection are organized by item type and size of the material—all books are together, all newspapers are together, and all ephemera are together. Each item is given a call number. The Wilcox Collection is cataloged as "RH WL" followed by a letter (such as A or G), and finally a number. The "RH" stands for Regional History, and indicates that the Wilcox Collection is part of the larger Kansas Collection; the "WL" indicates Laird Wilcox; the following letter indicates the size of the item—the letters used range from A to R with smaller items marked by letters near the beginning of the alphabet and larger items with letters progressing toward the end of the alphabet; and the final number in the cataloging process is assigned sequentially as items are accessioned into the collection. It is a goal to have all of the items cataloged and available via the University's Online Library Catalog. While awaiting processing and cataloging, items are searchable via card catalogs available within the library.

*Promoting the Wilcox Collection*

The Wilcox Collection, along with the remainder of the collections housed at the KSRL, is promoted first through availability of the University's online catalog. Researchers on campus and from around the world can access this database to

learn of the holdings available at the library. Those who know of the collection can actively seek it out and others may stumble upon it by browsing the catalog. Those who may not come across the Wilcox Collection on their own may be introduced to it in a variety of other settings.

Library staff members give presentations to various college classes at KU. In any given semester Ms. Shulte, Ms. Williams, and other staff members at the library talk to graduate and undergraduate students in History, American Studies, Communication Studies, Political Science, and Sociology courses. While material from the Wilcox Collection is not always the focal point of a given presentation about the resources available at the KSRL, it is always mentioned as a unique and valuable collection. Beyond presentations, library staff members give tours of the facility, will meet one-on-one with students seeking help with a research topic or they may help design research projects for students. Students and faculty from other institutions are likewise welcome at the library. Independent scholars, students, and faculty from institutions other than the University of Kansas may apply for travel grants of up to \$500 to help defray costs of travel and lodging while using the KSRL resources. These grants allow researchers to use any of the collections housed at the library and are especially popular among those using the Wilcox Collection—about one third of grant recipients use the Wilcox Collection.<sup>22</sup> Library staff members reach yet others by speaking publicly to colleagues from other institutions at conferences for professional associations such as the Society of America Archivists and Midwest Archives Conference.

For those with a general interest in the materials who may not necessarily seek out the collection for research purposes, there are temporary exhibits mounted four times per year in a case in the reference room at the KSRL. These exhibits are generally tied to specific events and feature artifacts and archival materials from the various collections. Along with the materials featured in the exhibit case, there are take away rack cards that provide general information about the topic of the exhibit along with information about the library and the specific department from which the material was borrowed, such as Special Collections, Kansas Collection, or University Archives. A companion web exhibit is available through the library's website—these exhibits are permanently posted when the physical exhibit is first mounted.<sup>23</sup>

### The Legacy of Laird Wilcox

Laird Wilcox has single-handedly collected over 100,000 pieces of material for the Wilcox Collection. With such an interest in the fringes of politics, one begins to wonder what beliefs Wilcox, himself, subscribes to. His political involvements reveal some answers to this question. When he entered the University of Kansas in 1963, Wilcox was well aware of political movements and viewpoints. At the

age of 15, he experienced labor unions firsthand when he joined the construction laborers' union during a summer job in Port Arthur, Texas. At the age of 17, while living in Baltimore, Maryland, Wilcox became involved with student protests. Over the next several years he was involved with Fair Play for Cuba Committee, May 2nd Movement, Students for a Democratic Society, Young People's Socialist League, Young Socialist Alliance, Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, National Committee to Abolish HUAC (House Un-American Committee), and the Student Peace Union. During his three years at the University of Kansas, Wilcox became an activist in the civil rights movement, serving as the Vice President of the Congress of Racial Equality. His two most notable (and noticeable) activities while at KU were his service as Chairman of the Student Union Activities (SUA) Minority Opinions Forum, and his writing and publishing the *Kansas Free Press*, an underground newsletter. These two activities most strikingly exemplify Wilcox's belief in freedom of speech and other civil liberties.

### *Seeking Minority Opinions*

"When men are brought face to face with their opponents, forced to listen and learn and mend their ideas, they cease to be children and savages and begin to live like civilized men. Then only is freedom a reality, when men may voice their opinions because they must examine their opinions."

—Walter Lippmann (*Wilcox, Selected Quotations*)

"Everybody is in favour of free speech. Hardly a day passes without its being extolled, but some people's idea of it is that they are free to say what they like, but if anyone says anything back, that is an outrage."

—Winston Churchill (*Wilcox, Selected Quotations*)

During his freshman year at the University of Kansas, Laird Wilcox or an activity that he was associated with was often featured in the *University Daily Kansan (UDK)*. With his extensive collection of extremist literature, Wilcox put together an exhibit in the Kansas Union. Wilcox arranged the controversial materials to give some indication of the spectrum of political thought. The exhibit included *Kill* magazine; *The Worker*; *The Rockwell Report*, the official publication of the American Nazi Party; *Way Out*, an anarchist publication; and *The Thunderbolt*, printed by the National States Rights Party. An article in the *UDK* described the attention that the exhibit was receiving: "There has definitely been a response to the display, said Charles Witman, Shawnee Mission senior, who works at the information desk in the lobby. 'At no time since the display began has there been no one looking at it,' Whitman said" (Stone, 1964). The exhibit was hailed by some,

but criticized by others. Both opinions of the exhibit were welcomed by Wilcox, who wanted to create a discourse by bringing minority opinions out in the open.

Partly because of his extremist literature collection, Wilcox was chosen as chairman for the SUA Minority Opinions Forum. The group sought to give voice to proponents of opinions not shared by the public by screening controversial films and bringing diverse speakers to campus to raise awareness of differing opinions. Activities included a 45-minute documentary film titled "Committee on Un-American Activities"; a speech by Hendrick Lauwrens Buurman on "The Case for Apartheid"; and a talk by George Lincoln Rockwell, leader of the American Nazi Party. Rockwell's presence on the campus proved to be highly controversial. Roughly 2,500 curious students and Lawrencians (more than twice the number of people expected or who could safely fit) packed the Kansas Union Ballroom to listen to Rockwell. Dozens of others gathered outside to protest the speech, holding such signs as "BEATLES YEAH, YEAH, YEAH! ROCKWELL NO!"<sup>24</sup> and "RACISM AND AMERICANISM SHOULDN'T MIX."<sup>25</sup> Journalists and photographers from newspapers in Kansas and Missouri were there to document the occasion. *The Wichita Eagle*, *The Kansas City Star*, *The Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, and *The Topeka State Journal*, as well as papers from Hutchinson, Kansas, and Salina, Kansas, all covered the controversial speech. Articles announcing Rockwell's speech at the University of Kansas, as well as commentary about his speech and the surrounding events, were front-page stories in the *University Daily Kansan* three days in a row. Rockwell's presence caused quite a stir on campus. Chancellor W. Clarke Wescoe issued a statement to students and the community regarding the appearance of Rockwell. The statement shows Wescoe's willingness to allow the speech to go forward but also his desire to make it clear that the University's opinions were not being expressed by Rockwell: "The speaker is not a guest of The University of Kansas and the University itself would not invite him. He is, however, here upon invitation from the student committee which is responsible for the Minority Opinion Forum of Student Union Activities. ... The present speaker certainly fulfills the requirements of the Forum—he represents a very minor minority opinion . . . I cannot recommend Rockwell to you. I despise his principles. I am convinced, however, that no one can be harmed by listening to him and that, conversely, his very presence may serve to make us all more dedicated to the principles of brotherhood as we come face to face with his repugnant views."<sup>26</sup>

Other coverage in the newpapers indicate how strongly Wilcox and others felt regarding Rockwell's right to free speech. Some showed their support by holding signs like one pictured in the *UDK* which read: "KULAC FOR FREE SPEECH."<sup>27</sup> Other photographs show pickets holding signs such as "FREE SPEECH FOR ROCKWELL"<sup>28</sup> and Wilcox, on the other hand, made his support known by promoting the speech as well as literally standing (or sitting) beside Rockwell throughout most of his time in Lawrence. One picture in the *Topeka*

*Daily Capitol* shows Wilcox and Clifford Ketzl, faculty advisor for the SUA Minority Opinions Forum, sitting beside George Lincoln Rockwell as he gave his speech (Klapper 1964).

### *An Underground Paper*

"Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one."

—A. J. Liebling (*Wilcox, Selected Quotations*)

Another major contribution to the Wilcox Collection and the legacy left by Mr. Wilcox is the *Kansas Free Press* (*KFP*) which Wilcox managed and edited.<sup>29</sup> The *KFP* was a periodical newsletter "designed to help remedy the inadequacy of the American press."<sup>30</sup> The parameters set in article content included rigorous inquiry and questioning: "the common characteristic of the articles appearing in the *Kansas Free Press* will be their radical mode of analysis; radical in the original sense of 'going to the root.' "<sup>31</sup> The editors and contributors to the newsletter were all students of varying backgrounds. Wilcox, then an undergraduate studying sociology, was the managing editor. Others initially involved were Richard Carson, a graduate student in geography; C. Steven Long, an undergraduate in political science; and James I. Masters, an undergraduate in sociology and anthropology. Over its lifetime, the paper appeared in various formats: early issues were comprised of two, two-sided 8-1/2 inch by 14 inch colored, mimeographed pages, which were stapled together; in the last 12 issues the newsletter was more professionally printed using an offset printer, and appeared in booklet format which often included illustrations or photographs. The frequency of issues varied—sometimes issues were offered weekly, at other times there would be up to a month between issues. Also, the contributors and associate editors were often shifting. There were, however, certain important constants—there were no pressures from outside groups like advertisers or sponsors who had any editorial control, Laird Wilcox remained the managing editor of the paper through its life, and the paper's focus remained steadfast. One of the later issues remarked about the independence and uniqueness of the paper: "The *Kansas Free Press* is a unique publication. It accepts no commercial advertising. It has no big 'angels.' It pulls no punches. It has no 'untouchables' or sacred cows to watch out for. It gives you the 'inside scoop' on many of the probelms [sic] facing Kansans and Americans that you can't get by reading the daily press and other outlets of the high-consensus mass media which are dominated by advertising and political pressures. Where other journals have 'sold out,' the *KFP* continues in the tradition of the old-fashioned 'muckrakers' [sic] that have made America great."<sup>32</sup>

The newsletter covered issues that weren't otherwise discussed in the mainstream press. It focused on local issues—like segregated swimming pools in Lawrence and the relationship between the University of Kansas and the military; statewide issues—including book burnings in Junction City and Minutemen in

Topeka; and national topics including articles on the John F. Kennedy assassination, Lyndon B. Johnson's State of the Union address, and U.S.-Cuban relations.

The KFP had graduated subscription rates—student rates were \$1.00 per 10 issues, regular rates ran \$2.00 per 10 issues, and the “supporting” rate was \$5.00 for 10 issues. These rates changed little over the three year operating time, though eventually student rates were dropped and the regular subscription was raised to \$3.00 per year. Mail subscriptions were estimated to reach a peak of about 100 and another several hundred copies were distributed on campus. According to Laird Wilcox, readership was comprised mainly of students and faculty as well as a handful of out-of-town subscribers. Among the noteworthy supporters was television comedian Steve Allen.<sup>33</sup> A letter to the public penned by Laird Wilcox after the collapse of the paper estimated that the total circulation of the paper was 600 when production ceased.<sup>34</sup>

The paper, which Wilcox now regards as having “a kind of stuffy liberal” viewpoint was considered “outrageously radical at the time.”<sup>35</sup> Controversy brought attention to the paper. On the back cover of a late issue, copy tempts readers interested in the paper’s scandalous history: “The Kansas Free Press, now a year old has raised over \$1500 for a Kansas publisher appealing an obscenity conviction; been attacked by the national leader of the ‘Minutemen’; published many articles considered too ‘hot’ by the local press; etc. If you ever lived in Kansas or went to school here (or even if you didn’t), you should read this controversial journal.”<sup>36</sup> The editors and staff weren’t the only ones who considered the paper controversial. When the KFP expanded its format, it requested price quotations for adding a masthead from area printing firms including Allen Press in Lawrence. According to an editorial in the KFP, Harold Allen, owner of Allen Press refused to provide a quote or any assistance to the paper saying that he didn’t want “anything to do with the Kansas Free Press or Laird Wilcox.”<sup>37</sup>

### *The Kansas Free Press in Context*

It was not until 1966, the last year that the *Kansas Free Press* was published, that the term “Underground Press” was coined. This term has been used to describe a body of publications that provided an alternative to the mainstream press. Most of these “underground” publications were not covert operations, but rather were published in public offices, which often used commercial printers and the U.S. postal service for delivery (Zald and Whitaker 1993, 1). In her article “The Underground Press in America, 1955-1970,” Donna Lloyd Ellison explains that underground publications can be defined as “underground” “because of their shared opposition to the American ‘system’ politically, culturally, and economically and because they provide a new kind of journalism” (Ellison 1971,105). Some common characteristics of the underground press are that these “underground” papers generally covered local issues and had “neither the ability nor apparently the inclination” to

provide national or international coverage; the papers were loosely tied with an underground community; and they were concerned with the “Revolution” or the “Movement” (Ellison 1971, 105). Put more succinctly by Laurence Leamer in his book *The Paper Revolutionaries*: “the entire history of the underground press can be viewed as a reaction against traditional newspapers and periodicals” (Leamer 1972, 15). In general, the editors of the *KFP* shared the belief that the mainstream press wasn’t providing adequate or balanced news items, and decided to fill this void. As Laird Wilcox explained, where other media “soft-peddle and pussy-foot around for fear of offending the special interests that are its life blood,” the *KFP* “exposes the absurd machinations of Kansas’s burgeoning right-wing and even takes a swipe at the left when it is due.”<sup>38</sup>

The *KFP* also stood apart from typical underground publications. The *KFP*, for example, didn’t fit into the overarching definition provided by Leamer who described the underground press as “an amorphous, variegated clan, whose only common link is allegiance to the heady pastiche of pot, peace, Panthers, rock, anti-war, anti-imperialism, anarchism and Marxism” (Leamer 13). Some of these issues seem separate from the *KFP* in part because the *KFP* predated the height of the underground movement which Ellison estimates was reached in 1967 (Ellison 1971, 105). The *KFP* at times espoused an anti-war and anti-imperialist stance but tended to not focus on popular culture issues in the same ways that other “underground” papers did.

The *KFP* was the first publication of its kind in Kansas, and also ranks among the early radical publications in the nation. The *Los Angeles Free Press*, considered the first, the biggest, and the most professional underground paper in America, started in 1964; the *Berkeley Barb*, considered the second oldest journal, began in 1965. These papers were operating on a much larger scale—by 1967, for example, the circulation of the *Los Angeles Free Press* reached 68,000 compared to the height of readership of the *KFP* at several hundred (Ellison 1971, 107). In Kansas, other underground press arrived much later than the *KFP*. The titles included *Alchemist*, *AWOL*, *Reconstruction*, *Tablet*, and *Vortex*—all of these publications began in 1968 or 1969.<sup>39</sup> Now these titles along with nearly 100 others from around the nation have been deposited and cataloged in the Wilcox Collection.

The *KFP* dissolved in 1966 primarily because of a lack of adequate funding. A letter to subscribers in 1965 described the many expenses facing the *KFP* which included research costs, promotional work, typewriter rental, mimeograph maintenance, printing costs, and advertising.<sup>40</sup> An impassioned editorial written by Wilcox in the final issue of the *KFP* also suggests tensions and frustrations with those on the left: “Nothing strikes me as being more dishonest than to align oneself with a political bloc out of sheer expediency. I’ve seen it happen before. Furthermore, it’s just as easy to ‘sell out’ to the ‘movement’ as it is to the establishment. And, in some cases, the rewards can be greater . . . [T]he *Kansas Free*

Press isn't for sale! I've been told that if we were a little farther right we'd get more support from the ideologues; and if we were a little more confused we'd be in with the new left. This may not be a fair assessment of the new left but it does have a certain crude logic!"<sup>41</sup>

### *Leaving the Movement*

"The most radical revolutionary will become a conservative the day after the revolution."

—Hannah Arendt, *New Yorker*, 12 Sept 1975 (Wilcox, *Selected Quotations*)

Later comments made by Wilcox reveal his disillusionment of the New Left. In an article from 1969, Wilcox is quoted as having said: "New Leftists try to deal with problems with dramatic confrontation instead of reason and compromise. This is the product of years of westerns and violence on TV. The New Left is the TV generation."<sup>42</sup> On 18 November, 1985, James Wolfe, a reporter for the *Kansas City Business Journal* wrote in his article "Far Right to Left, Wilcox Gets 'em All," that Wilcox "decided campus leftism had become nihilistic and violent. 'That bothered me, that and the dope,' [Wilcox] said. 'I dropped out of the whole leftist thing. They were crazier than the Birchers.'" And most recently, Wilcox has said "I found myself more and more uncomfortable with the far left extremists that took over the student movement in the mid-sixties. That just wasn't 'me.'"<sup>43</sup> Explaining more about what led to his change in politics, Wilcox reasoned: "I was a few years older than my peers, I had led an adult life, I had a family, and I was simply more personally conservative. I didn't drink or do drugs, for example, and I was repelled by irrational extremism and was quick to criticize it—Did I change or did the left change? I think we both changed, but primarily it was the shape that the left was taking . . . I also think I was too skeptical and analytical to stay involved in anything very long. That 'why' was always looming large for me. I had more questions than answers."<sup>44</sup> After leaving SDS and the left-wing activism Wilcox says: "I went through a period of experimentation and overreaction. I became very curious about the incredible excesses of the student left, why they did the things they did and why I had done it . . . I went around two or three years sounding like a right-winger, and since then I've gone back to a neutral position" (Finch 1983, 30). Now Wilcox finds it difficult to label himself as aligning with any rigid political beliefs: "I'm obviously very liberal on free speech and individual liberty issues. A few people have thought of me as a libertarian but I don't see myself that way. Civil liberties issues aside, I don't feel particularly strongly about anything. I'm kind of conservative economically, but even that has the qualifier 'compared to who or what?' I'm not religious. I think the family is a pretty important institution. I think the Iraq war is a stupid mistake. I'm very, very curious and I read

a great deal. I guess I think of myself as a kind of political iconoclast.”<sup>45</sup> Wilcox reflects that few issues are black and white: “I’ve spent a lot of time discussing the Pro-Choice/Pro-Life issue with advocates for both positions and I understand both sides very well. How do I feel? I dunno. It depends on which values you are trying to preserve, what’s important to you. I think personality, temperament, and character play a part in this decision, not to mention peer groups, family and one’s circumstances. Right and wrong are hard to find in some issues once you accept the complexities involved.”<sup>46</sup>

### The Continuing Significance of the Wilcox Collection

“You sometimes find something good in the lunatic fringe. In fact, we have got as part of our social and economic government today a whole lot of things which in my boyhood were considered lunatic fringe, and yet they are now part of everyday life.”

—Franklin D. Roosevelt (*Wilcox, Selected Quotations*)

“He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that.”

—John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (*Wilcox, Selected Quotations*)

Wilcox withdrew from leftist politics but his fascination with political extremism and his staunch support for civil liberties have continued. The questions that initially sparked his interest in extremist viewpoints are still as significant today as they were over 40 years ago. Why do people become attached to extreme political viewpoints? What do those involved with extremist groups have in common? Other questions also naturally arise. How do the views of extremists affect our everyday life? What do these extreme points of view say about our society in general? The Wilcox Collection has a great deal of raw material, which researchers can use to attempt to answer the same questions that Wilcox has been asking for the past 50 years. It is the availability of the materials to a wide public that has always been key to the mission of the Collection.

Looking at the use that the Wilcox Collection has received over the years helps illuminate its importance and its uniqueness. One researcher from Britain, with funding from the British Association for American Studies, spent two weeks in Lawrence in 1998 doing research on the Militia Movement. He was impressed with the volume of materials available at the library and noted in a follow-up article about his trip that many of the items in the Wilcox Collection were unavailable to him in Britain: “To give some indication [of the materials in the Collection], there were newsletters and flyers from the Militia of California, the Florida State Militia, the Kentucky Rifleman Militia, the Militia of Montana, the Michigan Militia, the

Vermont Free Militia . . . . There were publications such as 'The Freedom Net-worker', 'The Independent Newsletter', 'Patriot Report', 'The Anit Shyster', and the 'Aid-and-Abet Newsletter.' There were catalogues for videos and books from the Secret Information Network and American Viewpoint Monthly, together with first editions of some of those books including *The Turner Diaries*, and *Behold a Pale Horse*" (Mulloy 1998). Beyond working with the collection itself, the researcher met with Mr. Wilcox three times over his two week stay. Other researchers have included Jeffrey Kaplan—a Fulbright Bicentennial Professor of American Studies at the Renvall Institute at the University of Helsinki, Finland—whose research resulted in the *Encyclopedia of White Power: A Sourcebook on the Radical Racist Right*, a nearly 600-page volume which he edited. The book includes entries for such groups as the American Nazi Party, Christian Defense League, Elizabeth Dilling, Adolf Hitler, Charles Manson, and White Power. In the preface to the volume, Kaplan gives special thanks to the staff at the Wilcox Collection at the Spencer Research Library as well as to Laird Wilcox about whom he writes: "I owe thanks and more for his assistance and for his friendship." Wilcox was also a contributor to the work (Kaplan 2000, xv). Lyman Tower Sargent, Professor of Political Science at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and editor of *Extremism in America: A Reader*, also made extensive use of the Wilcox Collection. So important was the collection to his work that his preface is entirely devoted to it. He calls the collection "one of the most important collections of extremist literature in the United States today," and goes on to say: "While Wilcox has pointed out that many of the groups are tiny and some probably consist of only one person, the collection as a whole represents the resentments and dreams of thousands of people from the 1920s to the present and allows us a view into the minds that are frequently ignored or belittled. We should take these people seriously, not only because no one's dreams should be belittled, but because we need to try to understand both those dreams and the resentments that are the more common focus of interest for those studying extremes in politics . . . . [I]t is best not to hide from the reality of the hatreds that exist" (Sargent 1995, xiii-ix). Another researcher, Philip Finch, says it best when he describes the value of the collection: "The mass of the collection is daunting: nearly a quarter-mile of shelving laden with hundreds of file boxes, all full of extremist political tracts, periodicals, and other publications. Such a repository is a true treasure for anyone who knows the value of primary research . . . . I'm certain that I found material there which simply does not exist anywhere else. It would not have been there for me or for anyone else to find if Laird Wilcox had not saved it and the librarians had not catalogued it" (Finch, 6). According to Curator Sheryl Williams, the Spencer Research Library has "a very important supporter and promoter in Laird Wilcox."<sup>47</sup> The collection has been his passion for years and because of his foresight to collect and the generosity to donate materials decade after decade, researchers will continue to reap the benefits.

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## Notes

1. Laird Wilcox has identified traits of extremists in an article titled "What is Political 'Extremism'?" published in *The Voluntaryist*, issue 27 (August 1987). These traits include character assassination, name calling/labeling, irresponsible generalizations, inadequate proof of assertions, advocacy of double standards, predisposition to view opponents or critics as evil, having a Manichean worldview, advocacy of censorship of opponents, identification of selves by their enemies, tendency to argue by intimidation, the wide use of slogans and clichés, doomsday thinking, claims to moral superiority, the belief that it is okay to do bad things for "good" causes, valuing emotional responses, and sometimes claiming mystical rationale. In this article, Wilcox differentiates extremism from ideological unorthodoxy.
2. Advisor calls forum talk unprecedented. 1964. *University Daily Kansan*, 24 February.
3. E-mail interview by author with Laird Wilcox, 9 April 2004.
4. Ibid.
5. The John Birch Society is a conservative, anti-communist organization whose mission is: "Less Government, More Responsibility, And—with God's Help—A Better World," as cited on its website [www.jbs.org](http://www.jbs.org).
6. The McCarran Act also is known as the Internal Security Act of 1950. This act prevented

- communists and people belonging to communist front organizations from becoming United States citizens. It was completely repealed in 1990.
7. E-mail interview by author with Laird Wilcox, 9 April 2004.
  8. Ibid.
  9. Ibid.
  10. Laird Wilcox Wins Book Award. 1964. *University Daily Kansan*, 23 April.
  11. Kansas Free Press, numbers 40 and 41, 15 January 1966.
  12. Dan Austin. 1964. Minutemen's KU target is partisan of minority view. *University Daily Kansan*, 24 July.
  13. E-mail interview by author with Laird Wilcox, 9 April 2004.
  14. Ibid.
  15. Ibid.
  16. Ibid.
  17. This grant was titled: "Strengthening Research Library Resources—Discretionary Grants to Major Research Libraries (CFDA No. 84.091)." It was a part of the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965, Title II, Part C (20 U.S.C. 1021, 1041) and expired September 30, 1997. No appropriations were made after fiscal year 1995. The goal of the funding was "to promote high-quality research and education throughout the United States by providing grants to help major research libraries maintain and strengthen their collections, and to help make their holdings available to other libraries and individual researchers and scholars outside their primary clientele."
  18. Interview by author with Sheryl Williams, 4 April 2004.
  19. For a discussion of the diverse users of the Wilcox Collection, see the final section of this essay.
  20. Optimal temperature is generally accepted to be 70 degrees Fahrenheit ( $\pm 2$  degrees) and ideal relative humidity is 40 percent ( $\pm 5$  percent). For a discussion on preservation concerns specific to the Wilcox Collection and other collections held at the Spencer Library, see the following website: [http://spencer.lib.ku.edu/exhibits/25th/kansas\\_collection.html](http://spencer.lib.ku.edu/exhibits/25th/kansas_collection.html).
  21. Preserving Our Heritage: The Resources of the Kansas Collection. [http://spencer.lib.ku.edu/exhibits/25th/kansas\\_collection.html](http://spencer.lib.ku.edu/exhibits/25th/kansas_collection.html), accessed Monday 19 April 2004.
  22. A recent count showed that 8 of 21 travel grant recipients used the Wilcox Collection. See <http://spencer.lib.ku.edu/ksrlgrants/researchers.shtml> for more information about this program.
  23. See <http://spencer.lib.ku.edu/exhibits/> for a listing of current and past exhibits.
  24. Byron Klapper. 1964. Nazi ambitions told to KU crowd. *Topeka Daily Capitol*. 21 February.
  25. Pickets walk as Nazi speaks. 1964. *Kansas City Times*, 21 February.
  26. Wescoe: No harm in hearing Rockwell. 1964. *University Daily Kansan*, 20 February.
  27. 2500 jam union to hear Nazi. 1964. *University Daily Kansan*, 21 February. Photo by Tom Haler. KULAC stands for University of Kansas Liberal Action Committee.
  28. This photograph is among the items in a scrapbook compiled by Wilcox entitled "SUA Minority Opinions Forum—1963–1964. Laird M. Wilcox Chairman." This scrapbook is cataloged in the Wilcox Collection.
  29. All 42 issues of the *Kansas Free Press* are available in the Wilcox Collection.
  30. *KFP*, number 1, 22 September 1963.
  31. Ibid.
  32. *KFP*, number 28, 17 July 1965.
  33. E-mail interview by author with Laird Wilcox, 9 April 2004. A letter from Steve Allen remains among the files of Laird Wilcox's Correspondence and Memorabilia within the Wilcox Collection.
  34. What happened to the *Kansas Free Press*? 1966. Letter to the public, 4 July. RH WL MS 1.

35. E-mail interview with Laird Wilcox, 9 April 2004.
36. *KFP*, number 25, 31 July 1965.
37. *KFP*, number 21, 16 November 1964.
38. "KU socialist" drops study. 1966. *Lawrence Outlook*, 3 March 1966.
39. These titles were listed in Wachsberger, *Voices from the Underground*.
40. Letter to Subscribers, 1965. *KFP*, 15 February.
41. *KFP*, number 42, 26 February 1966.
42. Rioter may be next rotarian. 1969. *Wichita Beacon*, 15 April.
43. E-mail interview by author with Laird Wilcox, 9 April 2004.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Interview with Sheryl Williams by the author.

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